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Dare to Fail
Margaret Chan

It helps to be a “famous actor” when asking people to collaborate on a theatre experiment. Last August, I mooted an ITE-RP-SMU student project to three Institute of Technical Education College Central ITE lecturers, and five Republic Polytechnic faculty members. It would be a seminal collaboration across three educational levels, but being new, we could not expect formal management blessings. All agreed to test the pedagogy that promised to deliver more challenging and complex learning. “The Laboratory Project” teaches risk-taking, thinking-on-the feet, adaptability, and learnability. As there were no assigned funds, all; instructors and students, needed to be street savvy.

RP students designed sets, costumes, soundscapes, and marketing. An ITE student heads lighting. One RP lecturer waded through 86 year-one presentations on sets and costumes to shortlist 19. An ITE instructor and SMU instructor commented on the selected ideas and sent their reviews to SMU students who, as directors, producers, and actors, had full autonomy to accept or reject the proposals. SMU students crew under ITE stage managers trained in performance production. All students, rich or poor, learn not to take money for granted. They sell tickets. When I asked for a VIP ticket for a friend, they chorused, quoting my course outline; “We’re a business creating our own product and marketing it.” I paid up.

This Friday and Saturday, 31 Mar and 1 April, ITE-RP-SMU will stage four sold-out performances of Chong Tze Chien’s *Charged* (2010). The four different productions accommodate almost 30 SMU actors. All who wanted roles got the parts they asked for. There were no auditions. You do not begin learning with rejection. The casts are race-blind, gender-blind, talent-blind. Indians act as Malays, Chinese act as Indians. Women play men. Good actors take on small roles, and vice versa. In one show, a slight Chinese woman plays a forty-something Eurasian Lieutenant Colonel who gives an NS

corporal a severe beating. A Filipino student, a big man, plays the latter role. When I first saw Matthew cowering on the rehearsal floor before Charlene, I laughed, but both continue in their roles. We seek not well-made plays but courageous endeavours.

Theatre is the best lesson for preparing students for a world of “High Velocity Change.” You can be certain changes will happen, fast. Two days before we “bumped into” theatre, ITE changed the schedules. The SMU students howled in protest. They emotionally demanded to know where my loyalty lay — with them or with ITE. They quarrelled about what was right; about professionalism, and about honouring negotiated terms. I taught calm, level-headed thinking, quick analysis and strategic negotiation. Here is the transcript of the exchange between ITE and SMU instructors:

“Actors are different. Timing is different. Sound level is different. Positioning for lights is different. Cue calling is different. Different heights, different skin colour — all different.”

“You are in bed with amateur half hour.” (Meaning a show put on by amateurs. No “real” theatre class admits 45 students. The class size in a “proper” theatre school is capped at 10 or 15).

“Wanna do 4 cast, sure. We manage. We adapt.”

We settled just after midnight that day. The students had learnt a lesson in the Real beyond classroom and textbooks. The problem arose because ITE students and SMU students operate in silos. For the ITE team, staging four different productions of the same show was unthinkable. They thought that the different actors in the same roles were substitutes, as in a football match. SMU could not understand why ITE could not understand.

PwC recently reported that the next 15 years will see robots doing up to 50 percent of jobs in Britain. Men are more vulnerable, so too the less educated. Governments need to do job matching and think

about universal basic income. Crucially, education must teach critical and creative thinking, and social skills. Minister Ong Ye Kung (Higher Education and Skills) assures us he is ahead of the curve. SIM University became Singapore University of Social Sciences this 17 March. Talk about fast and decisive action. Next year there will be up to 20 percent of places under the Direct School Admission scheme where schools can admit on either talent or academic achievements. Minister Ong might look to our experiment to consider introducing collaborative theatre-making as a capstone seminar for graduating students. Theatre is culturally misunderstood, with acting regarded as akin to prostitution, yet no pedagogy better prepares a young person for a job. Through roleplaying we learn empathy. By studying subtext we understand how the lived experience shapes behavior and values. When we act, with different actors in the same role, we become acutely aware that we have to adapt socially to engender the targetted response.

Theatre is about unity. The weakest actor can shatter the delicate suspension of disbelief that storytelling relies upon. We drill at rehearsals to attain perfection, we commit to our chosen leader. The actor's mantra is, "The show must go on." I know a Singapore actor who fell and broke her wrist early in a performance. With the hand in a makeshift sling, she completed the show and took curtain calls, before going to hospital. It took three operations to repair the injury but the wrist will never be good as new. This actor continues to perform regularly. I know, because I am she.

Margaret Chan is Associate Professor of Theatre and Performance Studies (Practice), Singapore Management University. The views she share are her own.